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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/25/2030
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [NI](#)
SUBJECT: CONSTITUTIONAL CONTROVERSY AS SEEN FROM THE SOUTH

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Philip R. Drouin for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Nigerian civic activists Tony Urinta, Pat Utomi and Denzil Kentebe warned ConGen Lagos of dire consequences if the current constitutional "crisis" over President Yar'Adua's prolonged absence results in a breach of the constitution and also if the Niger Delta amnesty process continues to languish. They claimed that side-tracking Vice President Jonathan would be perceived badly in the south and could induce separatist thoughts. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Nigerian civic activists Tony Urinta, Pat Utomi and Denzil Kentebe told ConGen Lagos Pol/Econ Chief and PolOff on January 12 that the current constitutional "crisis" resulting from the president's inability to conduct normal business threatens Nigerian's territorial integrity. They compared the current situation to the "hijacking of an entire nation," claiming that presidential power was being exercised by "a couple of individuals" extra-constitutionally. They argued that the apparent attempt to sideline the Vice President will sooner or later induce the people of the south to turn their backs on Nigeria altogether. All three claimed that average Nigerians are very agitated about what is happening, but do not have the time or money to take part in demonstrations. Utomi cited Internet chat-boards and blogs in which, he claimed, there is increasing talk about the coming Nigerian "Revolution."

¶3. (C) Urinta, Utomi and Kentebe stressed that they supported the constitution and deplored any development that could lead to the break-up of Nigeria. They also stressed that Vice President Jonathan is a "capable and loyal" man, dedicated to the constitution. They argued that while they recognized the shortfalls in the current constitution and advocate a Sovereign National Conference to draft a new constitution that truly expresses the will of the people, for the present the current constitution must be respected.

¶4. (C) The activists appealed to the USG to use its influence with Nigeria's leadership to ensure respect for the constitution and the transfer of power to the Vice President. Urinta went so far as to insist that "the ball is in the U.S. court." They stressed that a strong, constitutional leadership would be in a better position to deal with the problem of rising Islamic radicalism in the north of Nigeria and with the problems in the Niger Delta.

15. (C) Uranta, Utomi and Kentebe claimed that patience was running out in the south and the crisis was likely to come to a head sooner rather than later. They said the peace in the Niger Delta would not last due to mounting frustration with the lack of progress on amnesty. Uranta, who is a member of the President's Post Amnesty Committee, lamented the failure of the GON to take advantage of the blueprint for addressing the problems of the Niger Delta provided by the Niger Delta Technical Committee Report. The trio claimed that the current crisis could lead to not one but several (implicitly ethnic) wars.

16. (C) Pol/Econ Chief noted longstanding USG tenets of support for the territorial integrity of African nations and for constitutional processes.

COMMENT

17. (C) It is easy to dismiss the dire warnings of these activists as hyperbole, but there is an important body of thought among southern elites that their region would be better off separated from what they view as the regressive and parasitical north. Utomi was the presidential candidate of the African Democratic Party in the 2007 elections, is a lecturer of political economics at the Lagos Business School, and enjoys considerable influence with business leaders. Uranta was a pro-democracy activist during the Abacha military era, when he was detained repeatedly. He founded the Niger Delta Ethnic Society, a coalition of all ethnic groups in the Niger Delta, was a member of the Amnesty Technical Committee, and has close ties to the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), particularly Henry Okah. END COMMENT.

18. (U) ConGen Lagos co-ordinated this telegram with Embassy Abuja.

BLAIR